

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTU #2586/01 2901510
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 171510Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2048
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 002586

SIPDIS

NOFORN
SIPDIS

FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/17/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN INTERFERENCE IN U.S. EMBASSY ACTIVITIES:
THE GOT RESPONDS

REF: A. BALLARD-HOPKINS EMAIL OF 10/13/2006
[1](#)B. TUNIS 2501
[1](#)C. TUNIS 2408
[1](#)D. TUNIS 622

Classified By: CDA David Ballard for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C/NF) Summary. According to Foreign Minister Abdallah's Chef de Cabinet, recent charges of GOT interference in Embassy activities were either baseless fabrications or the result of a misinterpretation of events by Post. Alternating between feigning shock, surprise, anger, and hurt, Atallah blamed the Embassy for creating a bilateral problem by documenting its complaints against the GOT. He flatly denied that there has been any GOT policy to hinder Embassy activities. Atallah readily admitted, however, that he had no explanation for the most egregious instance of GOT interference -- the forcible blocking of EmbOffs from participating in a meeting with representatives of a local branch of an authorized NGO (Ref B). Atallah tried to chalk up such instances to GOT bureaucratic or security procedures, suggesting that they were somehow analogous to the hardships he experienced as an Arab Ambassador in Washington post-9/11. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C/NF) Hatem Atallah, Chef de Cabinet of Foreign Minister Abdallah (and former Ambassador to the United States), summoned the Charge on October 13 to convey the GOT rebuttal of U.S. complaints about Tunisian interference in Embassy activities (reftels). Atallah was joined by DG for the Americas and Asia Ghazi Jomaa, and Deputy Americas Director Moez Sinaoui. Charge was accompanied by Pol/EconCouns. Embassy has faxed to NEA/MAG a copy of the non-paper Atallah provided at the meeting.

Deny, Deny, Deny

[1](#)3. (C/NF) Atallah opened the 90-minute meeting with a declaration that he "totally rejected" recent U.S. complaints of GOT interference and harassment. (Note: Post had earlier provided MFA DG for the Americas a sanitized non-paper of the catalogue of GOT actions that appeared in Ref C. End Note.) Systematically working his way through the U.S. list of complaints, Atallah had an answer for each, drawing from the following explanations: (A) The U.S. allegations were fabrications that "did not conform to reality;" (B) The instances in question were "minor, isolated" incidents in the grand scheme of the bilateral relationship; (C) The matter amounted to a question of interpretation, and the United States had misinterpreted GOT intentions; or (D) The actions in question simply reflected GOT bureaucratic or security procedures. Atallah feigned shock and surprise that Post had

taken offense at the GOT's "procedures," noting for example, that it was standard practice for the GOT to require Diplomatic Notes for meetings at all "public institutions," which, he said, included institutions of higher learning. Time and again, Atallah sought to deflect criticism of GOT behavior by changing the subject to the various forms of bureaucratic frustrations that he had faced as Tunisian Ambassador in Washington, such as canceled meetings with Members of Congress, the requirement that he send diplomatic notes to the State Department's Tunisia Desk to get Executive branch meetings (sic), or worse, being a Tunisian official traveling through U.S. airports after September 11, 2001.

A Few Holes in the Argument

¶4. (C/NF) Charge took issue with Atallah's excuses, pointing out, among other things, that EmbOffs' being forcibly prevented by police from participating in a meeting with representatives of an authorized NGO (Ref B) was neither a fabrication or a minor incident, and it was certainly not a question of interpretation. Atallah still had no explanation for this transgression -- "What can I tell you (arms spread wide, shrugging) I don't know the details." Charge also contested the assertion that the incidents in question were "isolated;" noting that the accumulation of incidents would seem to suggest otherwise.

¶5. (C/NF) Moreover, he said, the appearance of editorials in three different Arabic newspapers on September 19 denigrating as traitors civil society activists who deal with superpower Embassies was no coincidence, but rather was indicative of a concerted campaign of intimidation (Ref C). In both the GOT's non-paper responding to U.S. complaints, and in the

meeting with Atallah, the MFA contented that the GOT exercises no control over the editorial lines of Tunisian newspapers. The non-paper went even further, stating that the columns in question represented nothing more than an "echo of a roundtable organized earlier by the Embassy that had aroused the interest of the press." (Note: Indeed, the Embassy had organized a human rights roundtable the previous week. The press was not informed of the roundtable, but the GOT was aware of it. This is the first time the GOT has drawn any linkage between that roundtable and the offending editorials. End Note.) Charge dismissed the notion of editorial freedom, noting that the Embassy had heard differently from newspaper editors. Besides which, he continued, showing his interlocutors a copy of a March, 2006 Tunisian newspaper account, several Tunisian cabinet ministers had given speeches earlier in the year that made the same point as the offensive editorials (Ref D). Noting that the Embassy enjoys cordial relations with the MFA, Charge pointedly asked whether there were other elements of the GOT that had problems with the U.S. Embassy's activities.

Comment

¶6. (C/NF) As the meeting wore on, it became increasingly evident that Atallah was far less bothered by the U.S. charges than he was about the fact that we had put them on paper. As far as he was concerned, the U.S. Embassy had created a problem by documenting its complaints; he was not prepared to concede that the U.S. non-paper catalogued, but did not create the problems. While the Embassy certainly got the MFA's attention with the non-paper, it remains to be seen whether the MOI, which is clearly responsible for the lion's share of these actions, will change its behavior. In this regard, it was disappointing that the normally well-prepared and responsive Atallah still had no explanation for the October 5 police blocking of EmbOffs' NGO meeting, despite the fact that a week had passed since Ref A incident.

BALLARD